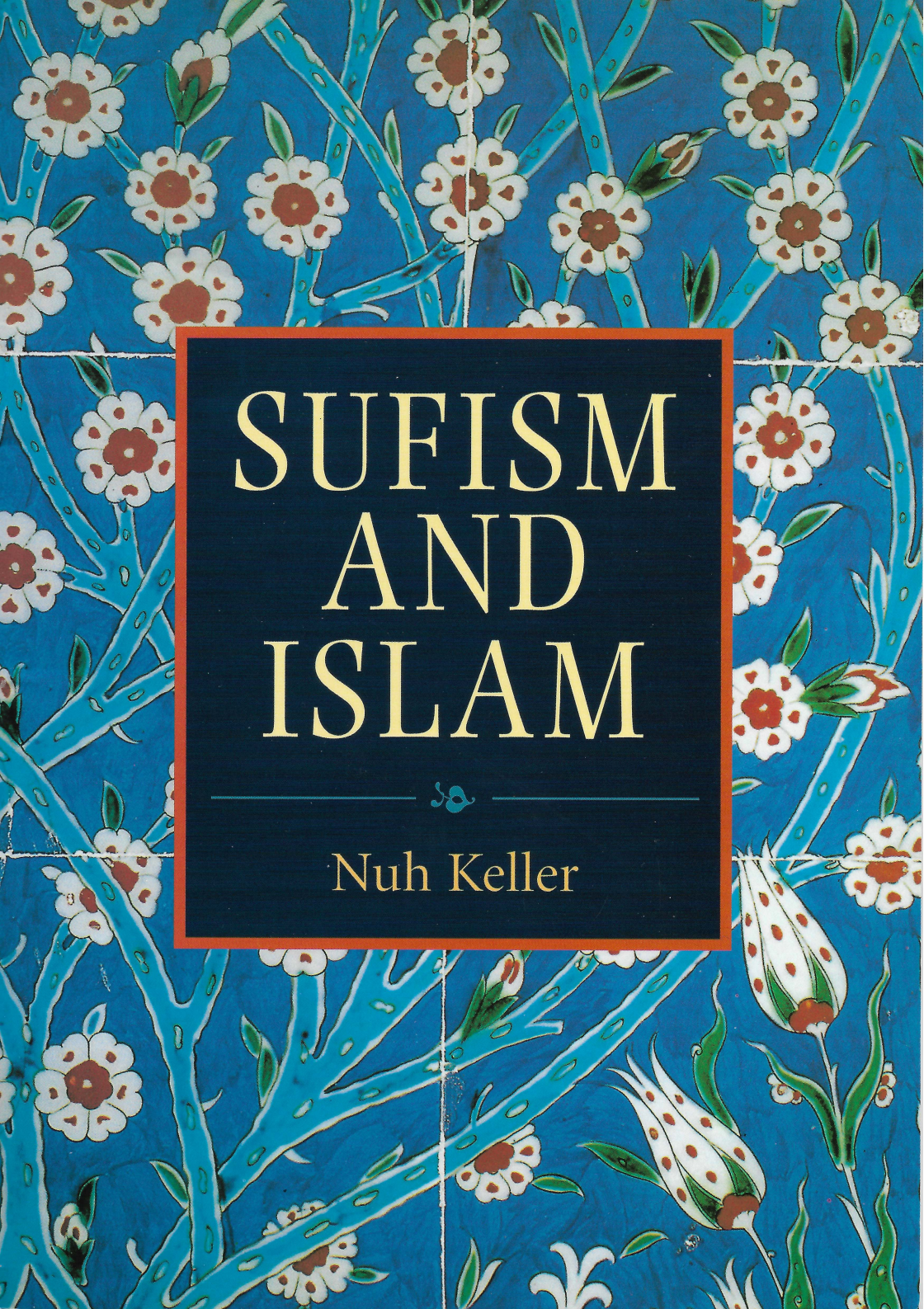
SUFISM
AND
ISLAM
Nuh Keller

بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

SUFISM AND ISLAM

NUH KELLER

WAKEEL BOOKS
AMMAN

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PREFACE

THE primary reality in every Muslim's eyes is Allah, who was here first, and will be here last. The universe is a secondary, derivative phenomenon from that primary reality. From this point of view the world is a text, and Allah's creating us here and revealing to us values and eternal truths through His prophets is its context. Divine revelations there have been, as many as the peoples of the earth, for since the beginning, man has sought to know and love God—some through adoration, others by discursive categories of mind, others by direct experience. The latter, in Islam, is called Sufism. The pages that follow describe its living tradition in Muslim lands today, and its place within the final revelation of Islam.

Contemporary Muslims in particular sometimes hear that Sufism is foreign to Islam, and wonder about its place among the traditional sciences of the religion. The present essay examines the Sufi path directly from its own sources, and lets it answer for itself.

But perhaps the larger point is to tell readers that they are not mere bodies, or bodies with minds, but body, mind, and soul. If we do not know anything about our soul, or feel its presence or growth, it is because our post-modern civilization and culture have done nothing to develop it, but let it stagnate. This is no great wonder, for a civilization without soul has little to give the soul. A point comes in one's life when one realizes that consumerism is not directed toward Higher Man, and that if

one aspires to rise above and not sink below, one must take the matter in one's own hands and set out for God. It is especially at such a point that a treatise like the present may have something to say.

In the Name of Allah, Most Merciful and Compassionate

PERHAPS the biggest challenge in learning Islam correctly today is the scarcity of traditional ulema. In this meaning, Bukhari relates the *sahih* or 'rigorously authenticated' hadith that the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said,

> Truly, Allah does not remove Sacred Knowledge by taking it away from people, but rather by taking back the souls of Islamic scholars [in death], until, when He has not left a single scholar, the people take the ignorant as leaders, who are asked for and who give Islamic legal opinion without knowledge, misguided and misguiding (*Bukhari*, 1.36: 100).

The process described by the hadith is not yet completed, but has certainly begun, and in our times the lack of traditional scholars—whether in Islamic law, in hadith, in *tafsir* or 'Qur'anic exegesis'—has given rise to an understanding of the religion that is far from scholarly, and sometimes far from the truth. For example, in the course of my own studies in Islamic law, my first impression from Orientalist and Muslim-reformer literature was that the Imams of the *madhhab*s or 'schools of jurisprudence' had brought a set of rules from completely outside the Islamic tradition and somehow imposed them upon the Muslims. But when I sat with traditional scholars in the

Middle East and asked them about the details, I came away with a different point of view, having been taught something about the bases for deriving the law from the Qur'an and sunna.

And similarly with *tasawwuf*—which is the word I shall often use below for the English *Sufism,* since our context is traditional Islam—quite a different picture emerges from talking with scholars of *tasawwuf* than what one is exposed to in the West. The following essay presents knowledge taken from the Qur'an and *sahih* hadith, and from actual teachers of Sufism in Syria and Jordan, in view of the need for all of us to get beyond clichés, the need for factual information from Islamic sources, the need to answer such questions as: Where did Sufism come from? What role does it play in the *din* or religion of Islam? and most importantly, What is the command of Allah about it?

THE ORIGIN OF SUFISM

As for the origin of the term *tasawwuf* or 'Sufism,' like many other Islamic disciplines, its name was not known to the first generation of Muslims. The historian Ibn Khaldun notes in his *Muqaddima:*

> This knowledge is a branch of the sciences of Sacred Law that originated within the Umma. From the first, the way of such people had also been considered the path of truth and guidance by the early Muslim community and its notables: the Companions of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace), those who were taught by them, and those who came after them.

> It basically consists of dedication to worship, total devotion to Allah Most High, disregard for the finery and ornament of the world, abstinence from the pleasure, wealth, and prestige sought by most men, and retiring from others to worship alone. This was the general rule among the Companions of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) and the early Muslims, but when involvement in this-worldly things became widespread from the second Islamic century onwards and people became absorbed in worldliness, those devoted to worship came to be called *Sufiyya* or 'People of *Tasawwuf*' (*al-Muqaddima*, 467).

In Ibn Khaldun's words, the content of Sufism, "total dedication to Allah Most High," was "the general rule among the Companions of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) and the early Muslims." So if the *word* did not exist in earliest times, we should not forget that this is also the case with many other Islamic disciplines, such as *tafsir* or 'Qur'anic exegesis,' *'ilm al-jarh wa al-ta'dil* or 'the science of the positive and negative factors that affect the acceptability of hadith-narrators,' *'ilm al-hadith* or 'the science of the prophetic traditions,' or even Islamic tenets of faith, the very word for which, *'aqida,* is not mentioned even once in the entire corpus of the Qur'an or hadith. Though all these sciences proved to be of the utmost importance to the correct preservation and transmission of the religion, none was known by name in earliest Islam, well illustrating why traditional scholars say, *La qadh fi al-istilah,* that is, "There is no objection to terminology."

As for the origin of the word *tasawwuf,* it may well be from *Sufi,* the person who does *tasawwuf,* which seems to be etymologically prior to it, for the earliest recorded mention of either

term appears to be by Hasan al-Basri, who died 110 years after the Hijra and personally knew many of the Companions of the Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and give him peace), and said, "I saw a Sufi circumambulating the Kaaba, and offered him something, but he would not take it, saying, 'I have four *daniq*s; what I have suffices me'" (al-Tusi: *al-Luma'*, 42). It therefore seems better to understand *tasawwuf* by first asking what a Sufi is; and perhaps the best definition of both the Sufi and his way, certainly one of the most frequently quoted by masters of the discipline, is from the sunna of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) who said:

> Allah Most High says: "He who is hostile to a friend of Mine I declare war against. My slave approaches Me with nothing more beloved to Me than what I have made obligatory upon him, and My slave keeps drawing nearer to Me with voluntary works until I love him. And when I love him, I am his hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his hand with which he seizes, and his foot with which he walks. If he asks me, I will surely give to him, and if he seeks refuge in Me, I will surely protect him. I do not hesitate to do anything that I am going to do more than My hesitation at taking the soul of a believer who does not want to die, for I dislike displeasing him" (*Bukhari*, 8.131: 6502).

This hadith was related by Imam Bukhari, Ahmad ibn Hanbal, al-Bayhaqi, and others with multiple contiguous chains of transmission, and is *sahih.* It discloses the central reality of *tasawwuf,* which is precisely *change,* while describing the path to this change, in conformity with a traditional definition used by masters in the Middle East, who define a Sufi as *Faqihun*

'amila bi 'ilmihi fa awrathahu Llahu 'ilma ma lam ya'lam, "A man of religious learning who applied what he knew, so Allah bequeathed him knowledge of what he did not know."

To clarify, a Sufi is a *man of religious learning,* because the hadith says, "My slave approaches Me with nothing more beloved to Me than what I have made obligatory upon him," and only through learning can the Sufi know the command of Allah, or what has been made obligatory for him. He has *applied what he knew,* because the hadith says he not only approaches Allah with the obligatory, but "keeps drawing nearer to Me with voluntary works until I love him." And in turn, Allah bequeathed him knowledge of what he did not know, because the hadith says, "And when I love him, I am his hearing with which he hears, his sight with which he sees, his hand with which he seizes, and his foot with which he walks," which is a metaphor for the consummate awareness of *tawhid,* or the 'unity of Allah,' which in the context of human actions such as hearing, sight, seizing, and walking, consists of realizing the words of Allah in the Qur'an that

> "Allah created you and what you do" (Qur'an 37:96).

The origin of the way of the Sufi thus lies in the prophetic sunna. The sincerity to Allah that it entails was the rule among the earliest Muslims, to whom this was simply a state of being without a name, while it only became a distinct discipline when the majority of the Community had drifted away and changed from this state. Muslims of subsequent generations required systematic effort to attain it, and it was because of the

change in the Islamic environment after the earliest generations, that a discipline by the name of *tasawwuf* came to exist.

THE CENTRALITY OF SUFISM

But if the foregoing is true of origins, the more significant question is: How central is *tasawwuf* to the religion, and where does it fit into Islam as a whole? Perhaps the best answer is the hadith of Muslim, that 'Umar ibn al-Khattab said:

> As we sat one day with the Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and give him peace), a man in pure white clothing with jet black hair came to us, without a trace of travelling upon him, though none of us knew him.
>
> He sat down before the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) bracing his knees against his, resting his hands on his legs, and said: "Muhammad, tell me about Islam." The Messenger of Allah (Allah bless him and give him peace) said: "Islam is to testify that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, and to perform the prayer, give zakat, fast in Ramadan, and perform the pilgrimage to the House if you can find a way."
>
> He said: "You have spoken the truth," and we were surprised that he should ask and then confirm the answer. Then he said: "Tell me about true faith (iman)," and the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) answered: "It is to believe in Allah, His angels, His inspired Books, His messengers, the Last Day, and in destiny, its good and evil."
>
> "You have spoken the truth," he said. "Now tell me about the perfection of faith (ihsan)," and the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) answered: "It is to worship Allah as if you see Him, and if you see Him not, He nevertheless sees you."

The hadith continues to where 'Umar said:

> Then the visitor left. I waited a long while, and the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said to me, "Do you know, 'Umar, who was the questioner?" and I replied, "Allah and His messenger know best." He said, "It was Gabriel, who came to you to teach you your religion" (*Muslim*, 1.37: 8).

This is a *sahih* hadith, described by Imam Nawawi as one of the hadiths upon which the Islamic religion turns. The use of the word *din* in the last line of it, *Atakum yu'allimukum dinakum,* "came to you to teach you your *religion*" entails that the religion of Islam is composed of the three fundamentals mentioned in the hadith: *Islam,* or external compliance with what Allah asks of us; *iman,* or the belief in the Unseen that the prophets have informed us of; and *ihsan,* or to worship Allah as though one sees Him. Allah says in Sura Maryam,

> "Surely We have revealed the Remembrance, and surely We shall preserve it" (Qur'an 15:9),

and if we reflect how Allah, in His wisdom, has accomplished this, we see that it is by human beings, the traditional scholars He has sent at each level of the religion. The level of Islam has been preserved and conveyed to us by the Imams of *shari'a* or 'Sacred Law' and its ancillary disciplines such as hadith and Qur'anic exegesis; the level of *iman,* by the Imams of *'aqida* or 'tenets of faith'; and the level of *ihsan,* 'to worship Allah as though you see Him,' by the Imams of *tasawwuf.*

The hadith's very words "to *worship* Allah" show us the inter-relation of these three fundamentals, for the *how* of "worship"

is only known through the external prescriptions of *Islam,* while the *validity* of this worship in turn presupposes *iman* or faith in Allah and the Islamic revelation, without which *worship* would be but empty motions; while the words "as if you see Him," show that *ihsan* implies a human *change,* for it entails the experience of what, for most of us, is not experienced. So to understand Sufism, we must look at the nature of this change in relation to both Islam and *iman,* and this is the principal focus of the present essay.

THE PLACE OF SUFISM IN ISLAM

At the level of Islam, we said that *tasawwuf* requires *Islam,* through "submission to the rules of Sacred Law." But Islam, for its part, equally requires *tasawwuf.* Why? For the very good reason that the sunna which Muslims have been commanded to follow is not just the words and actions of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace), but also his states, states of the heart such as *taqwa* or 'godfearingness,' *ikhlas* 'sincerity,' *tawakkul* 'reliance on Allah,' *rahma* 'mercy,' *tawadu'* 'humility,' and so on.

Now, it is characteristic of the Islamic ethic that human actions are not simply divided into two shades of morality, right or wrong; but rather five, arranged in order of their ultimate consequences. The *obligatory* (wajib) is that whose performance is rewarded by Allah in the next life and whose nonperformance is punished. The *recommended* (mandub) is that whose performance is rewarded, but whose nonperformance is not punished. The *permissible* (mubah) is indifferent,

unconnected with either reward or punishment. The *offensive* (makruh) is that whose nonperformance is rewarded but whose performance is not punished. The *unlawful* (haram) is that whose nonperformance is rewarded and whose performance is punished, if one dies unrepentant.

Human states of the heart, the Qur'an and sunna make plain to us, come under each of these headings. Yet they are not dealt with in books of *fiqh* or 'Islamic jurisprudence,' because unlike the prayer, zakat, or fasting, they are not *quantifiable* in terms of the specific amount of them that must be done. But if they are not countable, they are of the utmost importance to every Muslim. Let us look at a few examples:

(1) *Love of Allah.* In Sura al-Baqara of the Qur'an, Allah blames those who ascribe associates to Allah whom they love as much as they love Allah. Then He says, "And those who believe are greater in love for Allah" (Qur'an 2:165)—making part of *being* a believer having greater love for Allah than any other.

(2) *Mercy.* Bukhari and Muslim relate that the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said, "Whoever is not merciful to people, Allah will show no mercy to" (*Muslim*, 4.1809: 2319), and Tirmidhi relates the well authenticated (hasan) hadith "Mercy is not taken out of anyone except the damned" (*Tirmidhi*, 4.323: 1923).

(3) *Love of each other.* Muslim relates in his *Sahih* that the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said, "By Him in whose hand is my soul, none of you shall enter paradise

until you believe, and none of you shall believe until you love one another . . ." (*Muslim*, 1.74: 54).

(4) *Presence of mind in the prayer (salat).* Abu Dawud relates in his *Sunan* with a well authenticated (hasan) chain of transmission that 'Ammar ibn Yasir heard the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) say, "Truly, a man leaves, and none of his prayer is inscribed for him but a tenth of it, a ninth of it, eighth of it, seventh of it, sixth of it, fifth of it, fourth of it, third of it, a half of it" (Abu Dawud, 1.211: 796)—meaning that none of a person's prayer counts for him except that in which he is present in his heart with Allah.

(5) *Love of the Prophet.* Bukhari relates in his *Sahih* that the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said, "None of you believes until I am more beloved to him than his father, his son, and all people" (*Bukhari*, 1.10: 15).

It is plain, if we consider the matter for a moment, that none of the states mentioned in these texts—whether mercy, love, or presence of heart—are quantifiable, for the Sacred Law cannot specify that one must "do two units of mercy" or "have three units of presence of mind" in the way that the number of rak'as of prayer can be specified, yet each of them is personally obligatory for the Muslim. Let us complete the picture by looking at a few examples of states that are *haram* or 'strictly unlawful':

(1) *Fear of anyone besides Allah.* Allah Most High says in Sura al-Baqara of the Qur'an, "And fulfill My covenant: I will fulfill your covenant—And fear Me alone" (Qur'an 2:40), the last phrase of which, according to Imam Fakhr al-Din al-Razi,

"establishes that a human being is obliged to fear no one besides Allah Most High" (*Mafatih al-ghayb*, 3.42).

(2) *Despair.* Allah Most High says, "None despairs of Allah's mercy except the people who disbelieve" (Qur'an 12:87), indicating the unlawfulness of this inward state by coupling it with the worst human condition possible, that of unbelief.

(3) *Arrogance.* Muslim relates in his *Sahih* that the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said, "No one shall enter paradise who has even a particle of arrogance in his heart" (*Muslim*, 1.93: 91).

(4) *Envy,* meaning to wish for another to lose the blessings he enjoys. Abu Dawud relates with a well authenticated chain (hasan) of transmission that the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said, "Beware of envy, for envy consumes good works as flames consume firewood" (*Abu Dawud*, 4.276: 4903).

(5) *Showing off in acts of worship.* Hakim relates with a *sahih* chain of transmission that the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said, "The slightest bit of showing off in good works is like worshipping others with Allah . . ." (*al-Mustadrak*, 1.4).

These and similar *haram* inward states are not found in books of *fiqh* or jurisprudence, because fiqh can only deal with quantifiable descriptions of rulings. Rather, they are examined in their causes and remedies by the scholars of the "inner fiqh" of *tasawwuf,* men such as Imam Ghazali in

his *Ihya' 'ulum al-din* [The reviving of the religious sciences], Imam Ahmad al-Sirhindi in his *Maktubat* [Letters], Suhrawardi in his *'Awarif al-ma'arif* [The knowledges of the illuminates], Abu Talib al-Makki in *Qut al-qulub* [The sustenance of hearts], and similar classic works, which discuss and solve hundreds of ethical questions about the inner life. These are *books of shari'a,* and their questions are questions of shari'a, of how it is lawful or unlawful for a Muslim to be. Their task and role in Islam is to preserve the part of the prophetic sunna dealing with states.

Who needs such information? All Muslims, for the Qur'anic verses and authenticated hadiths mentioned above all point to the fact that a Muslim must not only do certain things and say certain things, but also must *be* something, must attain certain states of the heart and eliminate others. Do we ever fear anyone besides Allah? Do we have a particle of arrogance in our hearts? Is our love for the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) greater than our love for any other human being? Is there the slightest bit of showing off in our good works?

Half a minute's reflection will show the Muslim where he stands on these aspects of his *din,* and why in classical times, helping Muslims to attain these states was not left to amateurs, but rather delegated to ulema of the heart, the scholars of Islamic *tasawwuf.* For most people, these are not easy transformations to make, because of the force of habit, because of the subtlety with which we can deceive ourselves, but most of all because each of us has an ego, a self, a "me," which is called in Arabic *al-nafs,* and about which Allah testifies in Sura Yusuf:

"Verily the self ever prompts to do wrong" (Qur'an 12:53).

If one finds this difficult to believe, consider the words of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) related by Muslim in his *Sahih:*

> The first person judged on Resurrection Day will be a man martyred in battle. He will be brought forth, Allah will reacquaint him with His blessings upon him and the man will acknowledge them, whereupon Allah will say, "What have you done with them?" to which the man will respond, "I fought to the death for You." Allah will reply, "You lie. You fought in order to be called a hero, and it has already been said." Then he will be sentenced and dragged away on his face and flung into the fire.
>
> Then a man will be brought forward who learned Sacred Knowledge, taught it to others, and who recited the Qur'an. Allah will remind him of His gifts to him and the man will acknowledge them, and then Allah will say, "What have you done with them?" The man will answer, "I acquired Sacred Knowledge, taught it, and recited the Qur'an, for Your sake." Allah will say, "You lie. You learned so as to be called a scholar, and read the Qur'an so as to be called a reciter, and it has already been said." Then the man will be sentenced and dragged away on his face to be flung into the fire.
>
> Then a man will be brought forward whom Allah generously provided for, giving him various kinds of wealth, and Allah will recall to him the benefits given, and the man will acknowledge them, to which Allah will say, "And what have you done with them?" The man will answer, "I have not left a single kind of expenditure You love to see made, except that I have spent on it for Your sake." Allah will say, "You lie. You did it so as to be called generous, and it has already been said." Then he will be sentenced and dragged away on his face to be flung into the fire (*Muslim*, 3.1514: 1905).

We should not kid ourselves about this, because our fate depends on it. In our childhood, our parents taught us how to behave through praise or blame, and for most of us, this permeated and colored our whole motivation for doing things. But when childhood ends, and we come of age in Islam, the religion makes it clear to us, both by the above hadith and by the words of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) "The slightest bit of showing off in good works is like worshipping others with Allah," that being motivated by what others think is no longer good enough, and that we must change our motives entirely, and henceforth be motivated by nothing but desire for Allah Himself. The Islamic revelation thus tells the Muslim that it is obligatory to break his habits of thinking and motivation, but it does not tell him how. For that, he must go to the scholars of these states, in accordance with the Qur'anic imperative,

> "Ask those who know well, if you know not" (Qur'an 16:43).

There is no doubt that bringing about this change, purifying the Muslims by bringing them to spiritual sincerity, was one of the central duties of the Prophet Muhammad (Allah bless him and give him peace), for Allah says in the Sura Al 'Imran of the Qur'an,

> "Allah has truly blessed the believers, for He has sent them a messenger from themselves, who recites His signs to them and purifies them, and teaches them the Book and the Wisdom" (Qur'an 3:164),

which explicitly lists four tasks of the prophetic mission, the

second of which, *yuzakkihim,* means precisely to "purify them" and has no other lexical sense. Now, it is plain that this teaching function cannot, as part of an *eternal* revelation, have ended with the passing of the first generation, a fact that Allah explicitly confirms in His injunction in Sura Luqman,

> "And follow the path of him who turns unto Me" (Qur'an 31:15).

These verses indicate the teaching and transformative role of those who convey the Islamic revelation to Muslims, and the choice of the word *ittiba'* for "follow" in the second verse, which is more general, implies both keeping the company of and following the example of a teacher. This is why in the history of *tasawwuf,* we find that though there were many methods and schools of thought, these two things never changed: keeping the company of a teacher, and following his example—in exactly the same way that the Sahaba were uplifted and purified by keeping the company of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) and following his example.

And this is why the discipline of *tasawwuf* has been preserved and transmitted by *tariqa*s or groups of students under a particular master. First, because this was the sunna of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) in his purifying function described by the Qur'an. Secondly, Islamic knowledge has never been transmitted by books and writings alone, but rather from ulema to students. Thirdly, the nature of the knowledge in question is of *hal* or 'state of being,' not just knowing, and hence requires it be taken from a succession of living masters back to the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace), for the sheer range and number of the states of

heart required by the revelation effectively make imitation of the personal example of a teacher the only effective means of transmission.

So far we have spoken about *tasawwuf* in respect to Islam, as a shari'a science necessary to fully realize the Sacred Law in one's life, to attain the states of the heart demanded by the Qur'an and hadith. This close connection between shari'a and *tasawwuf* is expressed by the statement of Imam Malik, founder of the Maliki school, that "he who practices *tasawwuf* without learning Sacred Law corrupts his faith, while he who learns Sacred Law without practicing *tasawwuf* corrupts himself. Only he who combines the two proves true" (*Qawa'id,* 8). This is why *tasawwuf* was taught as part of the traditional curriculum in *madrasa* schools across the Muslim world from Malaysia to Morocco, why many of the greatest shari'a scholars of this Umma have been Sufis, and why until the end of the Islamic caliphate at the beginning of this century and the subsequent Western control and cultural dominance of Muslim lands, there were teachers of *tasawwuf* in Islamic institutions of higher learning from Lucknow to Istanbul to Cairo.

SUFISM AND IMAN

But there is a second aspect of *tasawwuf* that we have not yet talked about; namely, its relation to *iman* or 'true faith,' the second pillar of the Islamic religion, which in the context of the Islamic sciences consists in *'aqida* or 'orthodox belief.'

All Muslims believe in Allah, and that He is transcendently beyond anything conceivable to the minds of men, for the

human intellect is imprisoned within its own sense impressions and the categories of thought derived from them, such as number, directionality, spatial extension, place, time, and so forth. Allah is beyond all of that; in His own words,

> "There is nothing whatsoever like unto Him" (Qur'an 42:11).

If we reflect for a moment on this verse, in the light of the hadith of Muslim about *ihsan* that "it is to worship Allah as though you see Him," we realize that the means of seeing here is not the eye, which can only behold physical things like itself; nor yet the mind, which cannot transcend its own impressions to reach the Divine, but rather certitude, the light of *iman,* whose locus is not the eye or the brain, but rather the *ruh,* a subtle faculty Allah has created within each of us that is called the soul, whose knowledge is unobstructed by the bounds of the created universe. Allah Most High says, by way of exalting the nature of this faculty by leaving it a mystery,

> "Say: 'The soul is of the affair of my Lord'" (Qur'an 17:85).

The food of this *ruh* is *dhikr* or the 'remembrance of Allah.' Why? Because acts of obedience increase the light of certainty and iman in the soul, and dhikr is among the greatest of them, as is attested to by the *sahih* hadith related by al-Hakim that the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said,

> "Shall I not tell you of the best of your works, the purest of them in the eyes of your Master, the highest in raising your rank, better than giving gold and silver, and better for you than to meet your enemy and smite their necks, and they smite yours?" They

said, "What may that be, O Messenger of Allah?" and he said: "The remembrance of Allah Mighty and Majestic" (*al-Mustadrak*, 1.496).

Increasing the strength of iman through good actions, and particularly through the medium of dhikr has tremendous implications for the Islamic religion and traditional spirituality. A non-Muslim once asked the present writer, "If God exists, then why all this beating around the bush? Why doesn't He just come out and say so?"

The answer is that *taklif* or 'moral responsibility' in this life is not only concerned with outward actions, but with what we believe, our *'aqida*—and the strength with which we believe it. If belief in God and other eternal truths were effortless in this world, there would be no point in Allah making us responsible for it; it would be automatic, involuntary, like our belief, say, that Houston is in Texas. There would be no point in making someone responsible for something impossible *not* to believe.

But the responsibility Allah has placed upon us is belief in the Unseen, as a test for us in this world to choose between *kufr* and *iman,* to distinguish believer from unbeliever, and some believers above others.

This is why strengthening *iman* through dhikr is of such methodological importance for *tasawwuf:* we have not only been commanded as Muslims to believe in certain things, but have been commanded to have absolute certainty in them. The world we see around us is composed of veils of light and darkness: events come that knock the *iman* out of some of us, and Allah tests each of us as to the degree of certainty with which we believe the eternal truths of the religion. It was in this sense

that 'Umar ibn al-Khattab said, "If the *iman* of Abu Bakr were weighed against the *iman* of the entire Umma, it would outweigh it."

Now, in traditional *'aqida,* one of the most important tenets is the *wahdaniyya* or 'oneness and uniqueness' of Allah Most High. This means He is without any *sharik* or 'associate' in His being, in His attributes, or in His acts. But the ability to keep this conviction in mind in the rough and tumble of daily life is a function of the strength of certainty (yaqin) in one's heart. Allah tells the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) in Sura al-A'raf of the Qur'an,

> "Say: 'I do not possess benefit for myself or harm, except as Allah wills'" (Qur'an 7:188),

yet we do tend to rely on our selves and our plans, in obliviousness to the facts of *'aqida* or belief that ourselves and our plans have no effect, that Allah alone brings about effects.

If you want to test yourself on this, the next time you contact someone with good connections whose help is critical to you, take a look at your heart at the moment you ask him to put in a good word for you with someone, and see whom you are relying upon. If you are like most people, Allah is not at the forefront of your thoughts, despite the fact that He alone is controlling the outcome. Isn't this a lapse in our *'aqida,* or, at the very least, in our certainty?

Tasawwuf corrects such shortcomings by step-by-step increasing the Muslim's certainty in Allah. The two central means of *tasawwuf* in attaining the *conviction* demanded by *'aqida* are *mudhakara,* or learning the eternal verities of Islamic faith,

and *dhikr,* deepening one's certainty in them by remembrance of Allah. It is part of our faith that, in the words of the Qur'an in Sura al-Saffat,

> "Allah has created you and what you do" (Qur'an 37:96);

yet for how many of us is this a day-to-day experience? Because *tasawwuf* remedies this and other shortcomings of *iman,* by increasing the Muslim's certainty through a systematic way of teaching and dhikr, it has traditionally been regarded as personally obligatory to this pillar of the religion also, and from the earliest centuries of Islam, has proved its worth.

PRETENDERS TO SUFISM

The last question we will deal with in this essay is: What about the bad Sufis we sometimes hear about, who contravene the teachings of Islam?

The answer is that there are two meanings of Sufi: the first is "Anyone who considers himself a Sufi," which is the rule of thumb of Orientalist historians of Sufism and popular writers, who would oppose the "Sufis" to the "ulema." But the Qur'anic verses and hadiths we have mentioned so far about the scope and method of true *tasawwuf* show why we must insist on the primacy of the definition of a Sufi as "a man of religious learning who applied what he knew, so Allah bequeathed him knowledge of what he did not know."

The very first thing a Sufi as *a man of religious learning* knows is that the shari'a and *'aqida* of Islam are *above every human being.* Whoever does not know this will never be a

Sufi, except in the Orientalist sense of the word—like someone standing in front of the stock exchange in an expensive suit with a briefcase to convince people he is a stockbroker. A real stockbroker is something else.

Because this distinction is ignored today by otherwise well-meaning Muslims, it is often forgotten that the ulema who have historically criticized Sufis, such as Ibn al-Jawzi in his *Talbis Iblis* [The Devil's deception], or Ibn Taymiya in places in his *Fatawa,* or Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, were not criticizing *tasawwuf* as an ancillary discipline to the shari'a. The proof of this is Ibn al-Jawzi's five-volume *Sifat al-safwa* [The character of the greatest], which contains the biographies of the very same Sufis mentioned in Qushayri's famous *tasawwuf* manual *al-Risala al-Qushayriyya.* Ibn Taymiya considered himself a Sufi of the Qadiri order: on his death he was buried in Damascus in the cemetery reserved by endowment (waqf) for Sufis, and volumes ten and eleven of his thirty-seven-volume *Majmu' al-fatawa* are devoted to *tasawwuf.* His student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya wrote the three-volume *Madarij al-salikin* [The successive stages of spiritual travellers] in a detailed commentary on *Manazil al-sa'irin,* 'Abdullah al-Ansari al-Harawi's tract on the stations of the Sufi path. These works show that their authors' criticisms were not directed at *tasawwuf* as such, but rather at specific groups of their times, and they should be understood for what they are.

As in other Islamic sciences, mistakes historically did occur in *tasawwuf,* most of them stemming from not recognizing the primacy of shari'a and *'aqida* above all else. But these mistakes were not different in principle from, for example, the

Isra'iliyyat or 'baseless tales of Bani Isra'il' that crept into *tafsir* literature, or the *mawdu'at* or 'hadith forgeries' that crept into the hadith. These were not taken as proof that *tafsir* was bad, or hadith was deviance, but rather, in each discipline, the errors were identified and warned against by Imams of the field, because the Umma needed the rest. And such corrections are precisely what we find in books like Tusi's *Luma'*, Qushayri's *Risala,* Ghazali's *Ihya',* Sirhindi's *Maktubat,* and other works of Sufism.

SUFISM AND TRADITIONAL ISLAM

For all of the reasons we have mentioned, *tasawwuf* was accepted as an essential part of the Islamic religion by the ulema of this Umma. The proof of this is all the famous scholars of shari'a sciences who had the higher education of *tasawwuf,* among them Ibn 'Abidin, Imam Razi, Ahmad al-Sirhindi, Zakariyya al-Ansari, al-'Izz ibn 'Abd al-Salam, Ibn Daqiq al-'Eid, Ibn Hajar al-Haytami, Shah Wali Allah, Ahmad al-Dardir, Ibrahim al-Bajuri, 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulusi, Imam Nawawi, Taqi al-Din al-Subki, Suyuti, and many others.

Among the Sufis who aided Islam with the sword as well as the pen were

> such men as the Naqshbandi sheikh Shamil al-Daghestani, who fought a prolonged war against the Russians in the Caucasus in the nineteenth century; Sayyid Muhammad 'Abdullah al-Somali, a sheikh of the Salihiyya order who led Muslims against the British and Italians in Somalia from 1899 to 1920; the Qadiri sheikh 'Uthman dan Fodio, who led jihad in Northern Nigeria

from 1804 to 1808 to establish Islamic rule; the Qadiri sheikh 'Abd al-Qadir al-Jaza'iri, who led the Algerians against the French from 1832 to 1847; the Darqawi faqir al-Hajj Muhammad al-Ahrash, who fought the French in Egypt in 1799; the Tijani sheikh al-Hajj 'Umar Tal, who led Islamic jihad in Guinea, Senegal, and Mali from 1852 to 1864; and the Qadiri sheikh Ma' al-'Aynayn al-Qalqami, who helped marshal Muslim resistance to the French in northern Mauritania and southern Morocco from 1905 to 1909.

Among the Sufis whose missionary work Islamized entire regions are such men as the founder of the Sanusiyya order, Muhammad 'Ali Sanusi, whose efforts and jihad from 1807 to 1859 consolidated Islam as the religion of peoples from the Libyan Desert to sub-Saharan Africa; [and] the Shadhili sheikh Muhammad Ma'ruf and Qadiri sheikh Uways al-Barawi, whose efforts spread Islam westward and inland from the East African Coast . . . (*Reliance of the Traveller*, 863).

It is plain from the examples of such men what kind of Muslims have been Sufis; namely, all kinds, right across the board—and that *tasawwuf* did not prevent them from serving Islam in any way they could.

CONCLUSIONS

To summarize everything we have said, in looking first at *tasawwuf* and shari'a, we found that many Qur'anic verses and *sahih* hadiths oblige the Muslim to eliminate *haram* inner states such as arrogance, envy, and fear of anyone besides Allah; and on the other hand, to acquire such obligatory inner states as mercy, love of one's fellow Muslims, presence of mind in prayer, and love of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him

peace). We found that these inward states could not be dealt with in books of fiqh, whose purpose is to specify the outward, quantifiable aspects of the shari'a. The knowledge of these states is nevertheless of the utmost importance to every Muslim, and this is why it was studied under the ulema of *ihsan,* the teachers of *tasawwuf,* in all periods of Islamic history until the beginning of the present century.

We then turned to the level of *iman,* and found that though the *'aqida* of Muslims is that Allah alone has any effect in this world, keeping this in mind in everyday life is not a given of human consciousness, but rather a function of a Muslim's *yaqin,* his certainty. And we found that *tasawwuf,* as an ancillary discipline to *'aqida,* emphasizes the systematic increase of this certainty through both *mudhakara* or 'teaching the verities of faith,' and *dhikr,* 'the remembrance of Allah,' in accordance with the words of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) about *ihsan* that "it is to worship Allah as though you see Him."

Lastly, we found that accusations against *tasawwuf* made by scholars such as Ibn al-Jawzi and Ibn Taymiya were not directed against *tasawwuf* in principle, but to specific groups and individuals in the times of these authors, the proof for which is the other books by the same authors that showed their understanding of *tasawwuf* as a shari'a science.

To return to the starting point of our investigation, with the disappearance of traditional Islamic scholars from the Umma, two very different pictures of *tasawwuf* emerge today. If we read books written *after* the dismantling of the traditional fabric of Islam by colonial powers in the last century, we find

the big hoax: Islam without spirituality and shari'a without *tasawwuf.* But if we read the classical works of Islamic scholarship, we learn that *tasawwuf* has been a shari'a science like *tafsir,* hadith, or any other, throughout the history of Islam.

The Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) said,

> Truly, Allah does not look at your outward appearance or your wealth, but at your hearts and your works (*Muslim*, 4.1987: 2564).

And this is the brightest hope that Islam can offer a modern world darkened by materialism and nihilism: Islam as it truly is—the hope of eternal salvation through a religion of brotherhood and social and economic justice outwardly, and the direct experience of divine love and illumination inwardly.

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Many Muslims look into their hearts today and find a spiritual emptiness. Speeches abound, but when the chairs are folded up and people go home, they find their prayers and inner life as dry as ever. Something is clearly missing. This essay shows that at the center of the Islamic revelation, there is a brilliant light that has never been put out, but in our times has been covered over by the bushel-basket of modernist and Muslim-reform literature. It proves from the Qur'an and sunna that from the very beginning of Islam, there has been a fully orthodox and operational science for increasing the impetus and intensity of one's relationship with the Divine, a traditional spirituality that if today is called "Sufism," in all previous Islamic eras was simply known and practiced as "the way to Allah." It discusses critics of Sufism, ancient and modern, and shows that if the false coin has sometimes circulated among Muslims, the real thing is the brightest hope Islam has to offer a world benighted by nihilism and materialism.

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